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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CONVERSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

INTRODUCTION: THE FACT OF CONVERSION

When the Christian Missionaries of the first century went into the Graeco-Roman world, all they took with them was a message. We do not possess a concise statement of what that message was, although we can reconstruct it to some extent from scattered passages in the New Testament; but we do know that it had a profound effect on the life of that world. It was not an accident that two of those missionaries were accused of "turning the world upside down;" to any interested observer this would have been a good description of what was happening. Wherever the message went, social upheaval was apparent; in Ephesus, books to the value of fifty-thousand pieces of silver were burned, and a profitable business went to pieces, because of the message; in a number of places it was felt that the only safe thing was to drive the missionaries from the community, and seek to establish peace by persecuting those who had professed to believe the message. It was found, however, that those who believed were able to endure

the suffering, for the sake of him whose name was embodied in the message, and the time came when many common folk went to death gladly for their faith, so powerfully did the message enter into them.

The effect of the message was not merely social, for individuals found in it a new loyalty. Paul says of the Thessalonians that they "turned unto God from idols,"¹ and they maintained this new loyalty even in the face of such bitter persecution that Paul was afraid that they might be tempted to return to their old way of life. It would seem from the Epistle that the Christians in Galatia were in danger of slipping away from the new loyalty, but it was not danger that moved them, it was the desire to be right, and do the right thing in the right way. When Paul placed the issue squarely before them and uncovered the specious arguments of the Judaisers, it is apparent that they came back to the message as Paul preached it, the message that had set them free from a yoke of bondage. This means that their state under the Christian message was related to their previous state as freedom

is related to slavery, and it is significant that in this case Paul implies that if they submit to the requirements of the Judaisers the effect will be just the same as if they had gone back to the beggarly elements of their heathenism. At least, he says to them, "Howbeit at that time, not knowing God, ye were in bondage to them that by nature are no gods; but now that ye have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how turn ye back again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire to be in bondage over again."¹

This is enough to indicate that when we are speaking of conversion in the New Testament we are dealing with a real experience. There is one thing, however, that we must make clear, and this may be stated in the words of Arthur T. Guttery; "We do not crowd our pages with proof texts, but every student of the New Testament knows that language is insufficient to declare the vital revolution of Conversion."² In the last analysis, this matter of conversion is not a question of the incidents

1. Gal. 4:8-9

2. Christian Conversion. p.27

referred to, nor of the texts quoted, it is a vital impression that abides through the reading of the Book. The thing that throbs in the New Testament is experience, and that experience results from the vitality that is found in the message.

CONVERSION IN THE SYNOPTICS

I am starting with the Synoptics, rather than with Paul, because the experience they reveal was associated with the bodily presence of Jesus, and even though they reflect, to some extent at least, the thought and experience of the Church in the age of writing, and are conditioned, again to some extent, by the intellectual and religious atmosphere of that age, yet they are all we have to tell us what the actual influence of the historic Jesus was, upon the people of his age. That is, if we can assume that they are reliable witnesses, they are prior to the letters of Paul in point of experience, and it is experience and not doctrine, with which we are concerned.

In the Synoptics the message of Jesus is

concerned with the nearness of the kingdom of God. He is not asking the people to believe that the kingdom will ultimately come, in some dim and distant future, although he does say, "But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father."¹ Neither is he asking them to believe in a special definition of that kingdom; it would seem that he was careful not to define the term, and he speaks as if he accepted the common interpretation; He does ask them to believe that the kingdom is close at hand. Even if we cannot agree with Schweitzer² that Jesus expected the coming of the kingdom at the harvest time of the year in which he was preaching, yet we must acknowledge that the Synoptics say decidedly that it was coming soon. "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand."³ Jesus says at the beginning of his ministry. When he sent out the twelve on their preaching mission he commands them; "And as ye go, preach, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand,"⁴ and a little

1. Mk 13:32

2. Quest of the Historical Jesus p.355f.

3. Mk 1:15

4. Mt 10:7

later in the same passage we have the words, "Ye shall not have gone through the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."¹ Then in the apocalyptic address of Mark 13 we have, "This generation shall not pass away, until all these things be accomplished" (v 30).

The teaching of Jesus is also concerned with the type of life that will characterize the citizens of the kingdom. Men, in general, were not living that type of life, so he called them to repentance. Not that he was at all negative in his demands; his main concern was not that they should discard their old way of life, for he saw the danger of merely doing this very clearly and called attention to it in a parable: "The unclean spirit when he is gone out of the man, passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and finding none, he saith, I will turn back into my house whence I came out. And when he is come, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more evil than himself; and they enter and dwell there: and the last state of that man becometh worse than the first."² Jesus wanted to win men to a positive way

of life, and the matter of first significance was that men should learn to do the will of God. This was more important than recognition of his personal right to their allegiance. "Not every one that saith to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven."¹ In the Sermon on the Mount and other places we have outlined the character of the man who would be a fit citizen of the kingdom, and Jesus is concerned that men should strive after this acquirement. He knew, however, that if this was to be achieved, it was necessary to make a new beginning. One could not carry all the paraphernalia of a misspent past into the new future that was the kingdom of God; so he said to them, "Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven."²

It is difficult to estimate just what the effect of his teaching was. We know that crowds came out to hear him, but there is no word that many were passionately devoted to his cause. There

1. Mt. 7:21

2. Mt. 18:3

were the twelve whom he appointed to be with him;¹ then Luke tells of seventy others whom he sent out;² there were also some women who followed him;³ and then there were the individual cases to whom he brought healing and help. A goodly number, it is true, but they do not tell us much about the influence of his teaching, for many, if not most of them, were attracted to him because of their individual need.

It does seem, however, that his personality had a powerful appeal. This is probably the best way to account for the fact that Simon and Andrew, James, and John,⁴ and Levi the publican,⁵ left their all and followed him at his simple word "Follow me." It might be that they had heard his teaching, and were captivated with the thought of the nearness of the kingdom, and so were ready, even anxious, to respond to his call. There is no hint in the story that they felt any need of a vital change

1. Mt. 10:1 ff.

2. Lk. 10:1 ff.

3. Lk. 8:1 ff. and Mt. 27:55

4. Mk. 1:16 ff.

5. Mt. 9:9 ff.

in their moral life, certainly not a revolutionary change. It seems that they recognize in Jesus a leader worthy to be followed, even to the extent of leaving their every day labor; so, in a somewhat daring, but on the whole, a perfectly natural manner they went after him.

We do know that the men who followed Jesus were not suddenly transformed into splendid citizens of the kingdom. There was ever a new lesson to be learned and a new adjustment made. Now they are told they must learn to forgive "unto seventy times seven;"¹ again they are told that true greatness is found in humility, and that the ideal is a little child.² When James and John come with their request for the important places in the kingdom, they are told that this involves a fellowship of sacrifice, and out of this incident the disciples are presented with the lesson that "whosoever would become great among you, shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you, shall be servant of all.

1. Mt.18:21 ff.

2. Mt.18:1 ff.

For the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."¹ As the days pass by in his fellowship, there is for these men an increased knowledge of what it means to follow Jesus. They are learning his way of life, and finding how different it is from the way in which men usually live.

There is a little more information in the story of Luke 7 :36-50. Here we are told that the woman concerned was a sinner, and on this account was outcast, at least from the company of the Pharisees. Such an one, probably, as walked with a high disdain of the opinion of her righteous neighbors. When she hears that Jesus is in the house, she comes with her cruse of ointment and her tears, more particularly, I think, with her tears. The ointment is incidental, and the tears are the essential thing in the story for in them we read what is going on in her heart. We would like to know if she had met Jesus before. Had she felt the penetrating power of his eye, burning with saving

1. Mk. 10:43 ff.

love, singling her out of the crowd? Or had she heard a word from his lips that broke through the crust of her life and touched a cord that lay buried beneath the accumulation of her sins? We do not know this, we only know that in him she found a friendliness that was foreign to her experience with other men, and she fell at his feet and her emotional wells overflowed, and she, the woman who was a sinner, found herself in love with the man who knew no sin. Good men she had known before, and shunned; but this one she must approach, for his goodness was not aloofness, it was friendliness.

This is a case of falling violently in love with a new ideal; and we cannot doubt that the resulting transformation of her life was exceptionally marked, but we have no material that will enable us to follow her career. We have here, at any rate, a genuine conversion; there is repentance for the past, and desire for the future; there is a word of forgiveness and salvation, spoken with power; there was the memory of one who was friendly and kind, who believed in her, and this would be a powerful aid in her striving.

In the story of Zacchaeus told in Luke 19:1-10, there is evident a desire on the part of the publican to see Jesus. He had apparently heard about him, but had not yet seen him, and his desire to look upon the new preacher and healer led him into the somewhat undignified act of climbing a tree. Jesus read the desire as involving something more than mere curiosity, and he told Zacchaeus that he desired to spend the day with him. With a very real joy the publican welcomed the preacher, and in a burst of generosity exclaimed: "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have wrongfully exacted aught from any man, I restore fourfold." We must not think of Zacchaeus as a particularly hard man, nor as one who was especially unjust in his dealings, for if most of his wealth had been acquired unjustly, his generosity would have been altogether without point, he could not have restored it fourfold after he had given half to the poor. There is no doubt, however, that the burst of generosity is a real reaction to the friendliness of Jesus, for it was a great act of kindness to seek hospitality in his despised house. In this Zacchaeus saw that the

supreme good was friendliness and felt that he in turn must be friendly.

There were times, however, when the claims of Jesus were recognized, but the person would not dare the adventure of following him. "As they went on the way, a certain man said unto him, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the heaven have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."¹ This is all; but in its very brevity and abruptness it tells of one who would not dare the dangers and hardships of the way even when he desired to walk therein. The verses immediately following tell of two others, and there were doubtless many more; Jesus was not outlining an easy way of life, he was touching the ultimate places, and he had a genius for placing his finger on a man's weakness. There is the story of the Rich Young Ruler,² who could say that he had kept the commandments from his youth up, but felt that there was something that he was missing. He was; Jesus knew it, and his unerring

1. Lk.9:57-58

2. Mt.19:16 ff.

finger went out; "One thing thou lackest, go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful: for he was one that had great possessions." We must not question the desire of these men to follow Jesus; they were probably very sincere, but they lacked the moral courage that would enable them to dare, and the simplicity that would enable them to trust, and one needed both courage and faith to walk with him, for he called them to believe great things about God, their Father, and he called them to live as if those great things were really true.

CONVERSION IN PAUL'S EPISTLES

In the letters of Paul we are presented not with specific cases of conversion, but with an interpretation of the Christian experience, and as we are particularly interested in the psychology of conversion, I purpose asking two questions: (1) What did the change involve? and (2) How did the change take place? If we cannot give a complete

answer to these questions, it is hoped that we may indicate the direction along which the answer lies.

WHAT DID THE CHANGE INVOLVE?

In seeking an answer to the question, What did the change involve? we must remember that although the writers were first century men, who expressed their thought in accordance with a first century philosophy and psychology, yet they did not produce their books from a conscious psychological interest. Paul was usually considering a specific problem that was affecting an individual Church, and his references to conversion are more or less incidental to this main interest. This is hardly true of Romans, in which letter he develops the doctrine of "Righteousness by Faith" and follows out its implications for Jews and Gentiles. Ephesians also seems to be concerned with the development of doctrine, but I believe this letter to be written, not by Paul himself, but by a disciple who is seeking to develop the teaching of Colossians into a Pastoral epistle for the benefit of the whole Church. In all the writings, however, we have to

remember that they are using the thought forms of the time of writing, and that they are trying to capture an elusive experience in a familiar word or metaphor. They frequently found that the phrase they were using was not adequate for the situation and they changed it. Therefore it is no small task to seek to find out just what happened to the individual when the message was received and believed, but it is one we must attempt.

(1) A CHANGE IN ETHICAL OUTLOOK.

First of all there was a change of ethical outlook, things that previously were quite permissible, were no longer allowed; some of the common habits of life were now called by the strong word, sin. At first this would hardly seem to be true in the Jewish community where Christianity had its rise, except perhaps for cases like the Woman who was a sinner; for the Jews were traditionally a moral people, and they were proud of the ethical content of their religious heritage. Then we have already seen that for some of the early disciples,

the sense of sin did not accompany their decision to follow Jesus. We have also seen, however, that Jesus elevated such virtues as humility, and sacrificial service to a place of primary importance, and that they had to adjust their lives to the new way. Then we know that Jesus continually found fault with the rigid legalism of the religious leaders of his day. For him, religion consisted not in scrupulous obedience to a written code, but in filial devotion to a Father's will. Christianity was, however, exceedingly fortunate in having behind it the rich moral heritage of the Jewish nation, and also in having as its chief exponent to the Gentile peoples, a man who had learned to love that moral law, and who saw that a true appreciation of its value was inseparable from the Christian faith.

We have abundant evidence that Paul made this central in his teaching. "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye abstain from fornication; that each of you know how to possess himself of his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust, even as the Gentiles who

know not God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter: because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as also we forewarned you and testified. For God called us not in uncleanness, but in sanctification."¹ It would probably be too much to say that the "passion of lust" was the normal characteristic of the Gentiles outside the Christian group, for there were no doubt many to whom this thing would be repulsive, but "even as the Gentiles who know not God" indicated that it was prevalent among them. There is a strong passage in I. Corinthians 6:9-11, "Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God? Be no deceived: neither fornicators, not idolaters, not adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor theives, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God," Here we

1. Thes.4:3-7

have a definite statement that entering the Christian community meant, for some at least, a break with their former method of life. It is not to be supposed that this only applied to the Corinthians, even though the city of Corinth was noted for its immorality, for a similar list of things that those who want to inherit the kingdom of God must not do appears in Galatians followed by a list of the fruits of the Spirit. These virtues are worthy of note as they indicate the type of life that the Christian was expected to live: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law."¹

FORMING NEW HABITS.

The change that is indicated in these passages is not easy of attainment; it involves the eradication of habits that apparently were well set, and the building in of others that were distinctly new. Moreover, for the most part, these old habits were formed on elemental passions or instincts. It

is easy to form the habit of shaving before breakfast, and comparatively easy to break this and start shaving after supper; but it is quite a different matter to form the habit of gratifying the sexual passion in a distinct way and then, when this is well set, break from it altogether and develop the habit of self-control. In the first place, the habit is reinforced by an elemental urge, an urge that abides during the period of reformation, and operates against the formation of the new habit. In the second place the subject is still surrounded by a number of stimuli that are keeping the urge awake. We must remember that an habitual action takes place practically mechanically once the appropriate stimulus is presented. The nervous energy that is set in motion by the presence of that stimulus has a definite channel along which it flows, if this analogy is permissible, and the flowing requires no effort of will.

To assist in the formation of the new habit we can assume the desire to reform. Somehow the presentation of the message awakened the feeling that

the former method of life was undesirable. The subject had a vision of a moral life that was preferable, and the desire to attain comes into consciousness. This, of course, is what the theologians meant by "conviction of sin." This new desire would enter into conflict with the primal urge, and if it was strong enough, it would triumph and the reformation would be complete. Then, operating against the ever present stimuli that were seeking to initiate the old habit, would be the fact that the subject was practically in a new environment. He would find himself a part of a new community that is enthusiastic over the demands and the possibilities of the message, and this enthusiasm would, for the time being at least, occupy the centre of the field of consciousness; and the contacts with the group of like-minded people would be extremely important factors in his reactions to environmental conditions. So the Christians are enjoined "not to neglect the assembling of themselves together,"¹ and "to be of the same mind,"² because when you get a group meeting together and thinking together, something of the strength and confidence of the group becomes the property of the

1. 2 Cor.13:11

2. Rom 12:16

individuals. With this same end in view, Paul, before he had the privilege of meeting the Romans, wrote to them; "For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; that is, that I with you may be comforted in you, each of us by the others faith, both yours and mine."¹ The last part of this sentence shows conclusively that Paul was conscious of the reciprocal value of public worship.

INNER CONFLICT.

It is not my intention to imply that every convert to the Christian faith passed through a stage of extreme moral reformation. There were probably a considerable number of Jews in the early Church, and many of them would have attained their normal purity of conduct. For them it would seem that the great task was recognizing Jesus as the Messiah of their hopes. It is a remarkable thing, however, that Paul, who could say with pride: "As touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless,"² yet seems to have become possessed of an acute sense of sin through fellowship with Jesus.

1. Rom.1: 11-12

2. Phil. 3:6

It is possible that this had its origin in the fact that he persecuted the Church; or that, in his strict observance of the Jewish law, he had not recognized the supreme value of the Christian virtues of meekness and humility, and, more particularly, of love that transcends differences of creed and nationality; both of these may have contributed to the sense of sin, although I do not think that either of them are fundamental, as I shall show later; but, whatever the origin of the experience, surely no one could have written the seventh chapter of Romans unless he had been deeply conscious of the power of sin in his own life.

There were also in the early Church a number of "God-fearers," Greeks who had become dissatisfied with their own Gods and had turned to the Hebrew Synagogue, attracted no doubt by the high standard of the Jewish ethic, and the righteousness of the Jewish God. These men were not prepared to become Jews, but they attended the services of the Synagogue, and paid their dues, because they felt the benefit of so doing. In the Christian message they found all that their hearts desired and they did not have

to surrender their nationality to attain it. It is more than likely that the grosser sins were already repulsive to them, or they would not have left their own Gods for the Synagogue, and they were probably endeavoring to form habits of righteousness in accord with the moral law of the Jews; but it is reasonable to suppose that the Christian message would broaden their horizons and deepen their convictions, and bring to them that sense of inward conflict that Paul experienced.

This sense of conflict seems to be an essential thing in the conversion experience, and it seems to be associated with the sense of sin. When Paul says, "For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God,"¹ he is not saying that every individual is guilty of certain specific acts that violate a code; but rather that in Jesus there has been revealed a new righteousness, and that all who receive the Christian message will experience a conflict between their own righteousness and the righteousness that is by faith. A.C. Underwood says: "What has disturbed the inward peace of many Christian adolescents has not been their sense of sin, but their inability to discover an

1. Rom 3:23.

adequate scale of values and a system of satisfying loyalties which would correspond to their expanding outlook and ambitions."¹ But does not the discovery of, and even the desire to discover, that "adequate" scale of values" and that system of "satisfying loyalties" produce within them that same conflict that characterized the experience of Paul? As a matter of fact, these phrases may well be used to explain what happened to Paul on the Damascus road; he was not satisfied with his loyalty to the traditions, in the face of this Christian movement. There came to him the conviction that Jesus and the Christian way, had a larger claim to his loyalty, than the tradition in which he had been reared. So also with his scale of values: things he had prized became of small account, and some things that he had despised became of great worth, and the conflict between the urge of the past, and the urge of the dawning future, is part of that experience which he has outlined in Romans.

1. Conversion: Christian and Non-Christian, p.132

(2) S SENTIMENT AROUND JESUS.

There would be no conversion experience growing out of this conflict if it were not that the new desire was strong enough to enter into combat with the old urge, with the probability of overcoming. The appeal of the new must be such that the convert is prepared to organize his emotional life around it as a new centre of interest. This is the second thing that is involved: the reorganization of the emotional life around a new centre. It is quite evident that, although the acceptance of a new ethical standard occupies an important place in the Christian message, yet it is not merely a new code that is offered, but a person. The ethic is written, not on stone or wax, but in the vital record of a living man. It is not a duty that is presented, it is a fellowship that is offered. Men are not called to obey a law, but to love a person. One hardly needs to pause to show that in the New Testament it is Jesus who is central in the thinking of the writers, as he is supreme in their lives. If one were to quote all the references to Jesus in the letters of Paul, there would be a long list. In this connection we must remember that

Paul is not trying to tell the life of Jesus, he is only interested in the closing scenes of that life, but he never tires of the name. To the Galatians who were wavering in their allegiance because of the word of the Judaisers he says: "O senseless Galatians who has bewitched you -- you who had Jesus Christ the crucified placarded before your very eyes?"¹

It was strange to him that after the meaning of Jesus the crucified had become clear to them they could drift away. To the Corinthians who criticised him as not being able to speak on many subjects he said:

"I determined among you to be ignorant of everything except Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ the crucified."²

We remember that he came to Corinth from Athens where he had spoken to the philosophers in the way of a philosopher, with very little success as regards the evangelization of the people. Now there is to be no more of this, the message is to be Jesus Christ the crucified. That is, the moral content of the faith, and its religious vitality, will be closely associated with the person of Jesus; not stated as merely abstract principles, but manifested as they were lived.

1. Gal. 3:1 (Moffatt)

2. 1 Cor. 2:2 (Moffatt)

This reorganization of the emotional life may have provided the power to overcome the old urge. We know that a "sentiment" that is, the organization of the emotional life about an ideal, is a powerful director of life's activities. And the loyalty that was engendered in these people was a sentiment of the strongest type, as it gathered around the person of Jesus. A statement like this, however, does not solve a difficulty, it rather creates one in the question that is inevitably raised: What was there in the story of a crucified carpenter that awakened such loyalty and love? There was most certainly something, for we are dealing with a real historical phenomenon. There was a time when some tried to show that Jesus was a myth, and I see by a recent book review, that R.H. Crompton, again advances this in a new book "The Synoptic Problem and a New Solution." However, no one, as far as I know, has ever suggested that the experience of the early Christians was a myth. The Christian movement is an historical fact and the people who comprised it, and made it, had a great experience, and behind that experience there is the story of a crucified carpenter,

and, as far as we can judge from the evidence, little else. What was there in that story that will adequately explain what happened? This we have to answer to some extent, because the discussion of the stimulus is as much a part of psychology as is the discussion of the reaction.

THE JEWISH MESSIAH.

To the Jewish believers Jesus was the promised Messiah. This in itself was a wonderful thing for he was totally unlike the traditional conception, and it was only by making such passages as Isaiah 53 messianic that the idea of suffering could be associated with the traditional hope. However, after the crucifixion, the disappointed disciples of Jesus had an experience through which they became convinced that Jesus was still alive; they probably thought of him as being alive again, and they apparently explained this by saying that he had become the apocalyptic Messiah. Peter, in his address explaining the enthusiasm of the disciples at Pentecost says: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that

God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified."¹ This Jesus was to be held in heaven until the time of the restoration of all things, when he would come and establish his kingdom. If a Jew could believe that Jesus was thus the fulfilment of the traditional hopes of his nation, there would be adequate incentive in this for him to strive after the type of life that was required from citizens of the kingdom, and he would give his loyalty and his love to the cause. Hence the activities of the original disciples, and of the wandering missionaries who brought the message to Antioch and other places, and of such men as Stephen and Paul.

The impressive advance of the Christian religion in the first century, however, was not in Palestine, but in Asia Minor and in Europe, and it was not among the Jews in those places, but among the Gentiles, with whom the Jewish tradition would have practically no weight. They were interested in a period of restoration, and the second coming of Jesus was an important part of the hope that sustained them. The

1. Acts 2:36; cf Rom 1:4

Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his son from heaven."¹ The Philippians are enjoined to "be sincere and void of offence unto the day of Christ."² So that this part of the message was by no means lost upon the Gentiles.

IMMORTALITY.

Another thing that attracted the Gentiles was the promise of immortality, a desire for which they had known before. The Stoics taught the immortality of the soul, and the mystery religions promised immortality to the devotees. In Christianity it was prominent, and had for its basis the resurrection of Jesus. I. Corinthians 15 is an exposition of this hope, and there are other passages. "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are asleep in Jesus will God bring with him."³ "When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also be manifested with him in glory."⁴ These are examples that indicate

1. 1.Thes.1:9-10

2. Phil. 1:10

3. 1.Thes.4:14

4. Col.3:4

that the promise of immortality through Jesus was prominent in the teaching of Paul.

FREEDOM FROM DAEMONS.

Then there was a new world view. For the people of that first century, the Gods lived in the heights, up above the atmosphere somewhere; man lived on the earth; and in between, peopling the atmosphere, were the daemons. They were as real as the Gods themselves, perhaps more real; as real as men, for men can doubt a God who does not enter vitally into his life, but no one could doubt the daemons: They were responsible for sickness, for disaster, for all the host of evil things that happen and can happen to man. It was not merely that they were bad, they were capricious; no one knew just how they were going to manifest themselves, and so one had to be very careful just what he did, lest he offend one of these and so bring harm on himself or on his own. Paul believed in these daemons, but the demoralizing effect of the belief is broken by his faith in Jesus. He writes in one place; "As there

are gods many, and lords many; yet to us there is one God, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through him."¹ The real note of triumph, however, is sounded when he says; "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."²

To the Gentiles this word about one who was able to save from the thralldom of the daemons would be an attractive message, because it offered a real redemption. One of the arguments that Paul uses with the Galatians against the Judaisers is that they are in danger of slipping back into the bondage of the rudiments, or elements, of the world; this also is the danger against which he warns the Colossians.

SALVATION FROM SIN.

Then this message promised a salvation from personal sin, and this is approached in two ways.

1. 1 Cor. 8:5-6
2. Rom.8: 38-39

We have already spoken of the conflict that is an essential part of the conversion experience, but now it may be added that the conflict really appears because sin destroys the harmony that ought to exist between man and God. It is, of course, a question just how clearly defined the idea of God would be before the Christian message came with its monotheism. For the Jews at this time it would be perfectly clear, and possible also for the God-fearers, for the monotheism of Judaism would be one of the things that would attract them to that religion. It must be very preferable to think of one God rather than of many. For the Gentiles, however, with their daemon-possessed and God-possessed universe the idea of attaining a harmony between their own souls and the manifold wills that were around them must have been an unsettling thing. In the Christian message the many Gods are resolved into one, and it is possible, through the content of this message, to establish harmony.

We have seen that the message awakened a sense of sin, it did more than this; it showed that outside of the message there was no possibility

of finding favor with God. The Lord Jesus would come from heaven, "rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus; who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might."¹ Paul makes it plain that even the strict observance of the Jewish moral law will not give the filial fellowship that the Christian enjoys in Christ, and the argument had all the weight of his own experience behind it. "By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."² This, of course, brings everyone into condemnation; but if the message is believed in its completeness, the condemnation is lifted, and, in the words of Dr. Morgan, "The believer is acquitted at God's judgment bar, declared to be just or righteous and invested with the splendid heritage which such a verdict carries with it."³

Sin, however, has more than a judicial significance, it is a personal matter. The flesh is prone to follow the way it has walked, and

1. 2 Thes. 1:8-9

2. Gal. 2:6

3. Religion and Theology of Paul. p.147

acquittal at God's judgment bar can only refer to what is past. So, if the message stopped at forgiveness for what is past, it would not bring peace to the troubled soul, it would only intensify the sense of danger. But the message did not stop there, it offered to save men from their tendency to sin. Paul, in that piece of self-analysis which is Romans 7, refers to this difficulty and cries, "Miserable wretch that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? God will! Thanks be to him through Jesus Christ our Lord."¹

SONS OF GOD.

Then the relationship that exists between God and man was changed vitally through the conversion process. Paul knows nothing of the modern doctrine, which may be found in the Synoptics, that all men are children of God. He expressly states that all the Jews are not sons, using the Rabbinical method of interpretation to prove his point. "For they are not all Israel, that are of Israel; neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall they seed be called. That is, it is

1. Rom.7: 24-25 (Moffatt)

not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed."¹ If this was true of the Jews, it would certainly mean that the Gentiles were outside of the family fellowship. At any rate, we are definitely told that "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God."² Whatever may be the relationship between that natural man and God it is quite evident that in Paul, it is a much more intimate and truly filial relation after conversion.

Paul explains this new relationship by using the Roman law term, adoption, by which, one who is not a blood relation, is admitted into the full privileges and responsibilities of a son. The liberty that Christians enjoyed was the liberty of sons adopted into the Father's family.

Believers are admitted into this new relationship through Christ. "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved

1. Rom.9:6-8

2. Rom.8:14

by his life."¹ Through Christ, the former enmity is dissolved, and reconciliation takes place, and the believer becomes a son, and through this sonship, he is heir to all the promises of God. "And if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ."²

This would certainly be an attractive message to men who could be made to believe that without it they were alien to all the best that life holds, so it is no wonder that when the assurance of this relationship possesses them they should feel that "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new."³ All things were new because they were newly related to them; the God of all things was their God, and they were his children.

From this it would seem that the Christian message offered a quite complete redemption. The believer was to be redeemed from the alien world, and its capricious daemons; from the penalty and the

1. Rom.5:10

2. Rom.8:17

3. 2 Cor.5:17

power of sin; and also from death; then he was to be admitted into the family of God. This redemption was offered in the name and through the power of Jesus, and belief in it was abundantly justified by the experience of those who trusted its claims. Therefore the message would come to the people of that day with a powerful appeal, and in their need there would be a strong tendency to accept him as a new centre of interest about which the emotional life might be organized.

(3) A DIVINE INSERT.

When we come to the interpretation of this experience as we find it in the New Testament writings, we see that there is another thing involved in conversion. There is a new power acting with and in the man to achieve his redemption. There is, of course, the power of his new resolve, and the power of the reorganization of his emotional life;; but these are qualities of the man himself, and have a perfectly natural origin within his mental and emotional processes. The New Testament finds, however, that there is nothing in the man that will

adequately explain this experience, and postulates a new, divine insert to account for it. This is the Spirit of Christ, or the Spirit of God, as it is certain that Paul uses the phrases interchangeably. In I Corinthians 1:2 Christians are sanctified in Christ Jesus, In Romans 15:16, they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and so on in a large number of cases. In II Corinthians 12:1, it appears that Paul attributes an ecstatic experience to Christ, and this was the distinctive work of the Spirit. What I want to emphasize is that the Spirit has no connection with the natural man, it is not a part of his normal mental or spiritual equipment. As Dor. Morgan says, "Of an immanence of the Spirit either in the Universe or in man the Apostle knows nothing. For him it is the exclusive possession of believers, and something distinct from their own personality."¹ Everywhere in Paul, it is indicated that the Spirit is something received: "But we received, not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God."² In the eighth chapter of Romans, where the Spirit and the flesh are contrasted we read; "But ye are not in

1. Religion and Theology of Paul. p.28

2. 1 Cor. 2:12

the flesh but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you. But if any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."¹ It is the presence of the Spirit that gives the assurance that sonship with God is a realised fact; "And because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father."² This Spirit belongs only to the believers, and it must not be thought of as a normal, native possession of man.

The fact that Paul thought of the Spirit in this way really takes it out of the realm of our discussion; for psychology is the study of behavior, and, as far as we are concerned in this paper, it may be limited to human behavior, for we are only concerned with an experience of the human organism. The discussion of a Spirit which is distinct from man, and which operates on or in man, is the subject of metaphysics, not of psychology, although if the unconscious mind is ever defined in satisfactory, scientific terms, and the laws of its working reduced to scientific concepts, then we may have a new psychology that will permit us to perceive and follow

1. Rom. 8:9

2. Gal. 4:6

the operation of the Spirit on the conscious processes. I do not think we have reached this stage yet. This does not mean that we can say nothing about the working of the Spirit, for I do not see how we can avoid the subject when we are dealing with conversion in the New Testament. As I have already said, the most significant thing about first century Christianity is the experience of the believers, this is not only so for us, it was so for them, and when they tried to explain it they were compelled to introduce the concept of the Spirit of God working in the soul of man.

SALVATION A PROCESS.

There is one place where we have to guard against overstatement, and that is in the completeness of the salvation from sin that was found in the Christian faith. Some of the figures used indicate that the change was profound. "Seeing ye have put off the old man with his doings, and have put on the new man, which is being renewed unto knowledge after the image of him that created him."¹ "Our old man was crucified with him, that the body

1. Col. 3:9-10

of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin."¹ This is not only the case in Paul, for in Ephesians we have; "And you did he make alive when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins."² This whole passage might have been quoted. The passage from death to life is prominent in the Johannine writings also. There are many more passages that might have been quoted; but this is enough to show that the experience was very marked and significant, and yet we have indications that it was not an absolute change. They may say that the old man is dead, but on occasion he seems to have some life left in him. Paul is continually warning the Christians against sin. In the Thessalonian Church there are disorderly ones to be admonished.³ There was positive and hideous sin in the Church at Corinth.⁴ The Galatians must not use their freedom "for an occasion to the flesh."⁵ This does not mean that the conversion experience was an illusion, or that there was no real salvation in the message, but rather that it was a very real

1. Rom. 6:6

2. Eph. 2:1

3. 1. Thes. 5:14

4. 1. Cor 5.

5. Gal. 5:13

experience; there was a real psychological continuity, for the individual convert carried over into the new life the paraphernalia of the old life, and the old desires would occasionally, if not continually, reassert themselves and have to be indulged or overcome. Neither does this lessen the significance of the experience, rather does it increase it, for the old man was "put off" by these people, and they worked out a very real salvation for themselves, and for the world.

HOW DID THE CHANGE TAKE PLACE?

The other question that has to concern us for a while is; How did the change take place? It is quite evident that the Christian message did not tell of a new power that was in the world to work its way irresistably into the lives of all people. There would be a large number who would die without having heard the message; but I am not thinking of them, but rather of those who did hear, but for whom the experience of conversion did not become a reality. There were Jews who simply could not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, or that the

Messiah was Jesus. There is a significance in this order of the words, for they could believe that there was a Messiah reserved in heaven until the fulfilment of all things, but they could not believe that this Messiah was the Jesus who had been crucified. Paul says that the cross was a stumbling block for the Jews,¹ which means that they could not associate the crucifixion with the Messiah. Then there were Greeks who could not give to the crucified carpenter the allegiance that was required in the Christian group. They heard the message at the same time as their friends, they saw the change in the lives of their acquaintances, but the experience was not theirs. Why? It is not to be supposed that there was a spirit in the message that just chose one here and there in a haphazard way, capriciously passing some by, and just as capriciously lighting on this one or that without any method or design. The message was delivered with the conscious purpose of winning all men to its truth. Why then is it that the message leaves some men cold and unchanged, while it leads others into the experience of conversion?

1. 1 Cor. 1:23

THE INNER RESTLESSNESS.

I think we may lay it down as a first approximation that those who were disturbed by the Christian message had already been disturbed by life. I have already spoken of the conflict that is an essential part of the conversion experience, now I want to say that back of that conflict there was a restlessness that would be present in the individual before the message came to give it articulation. This restlessness was the first necessity if the message was to make a winning appeal. It may be that the restlessness would only appear after the message was heard; but I am inclined to think that usually it would be present before, even though it was not recognized. This restlessness, even though undefined and inarticulate, would be accompanied by a vague sense that the organism and its environment was out of harmony, and, until it was defined, there would be no possibility of relief for the individual. If, however, there was presented an object that was a possible satisfier, then the restlessness would become articulate in relation to that object, and

a desire to possess it would be created; i.e. the object, in the case under discussion, the Christian message, would make an appeal. If the restlessness was not defined during the hearing of the message, or if the message did not appear as a possible satisfier, then it would have no appeal. A Jew who could not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, might have his restlessness defined so that he would feel that what he needed was a filial fellowship with God, yet he might not be able to believe that a faith in which Jesus was central and supreme could lead him into that needed fellowship. So the message would have no appeal. It is quite possible, of course, that some who were completely unconscious of any restlessness before the coming of the missionaries would have this process initiated by the preaching of the word, but in this case a certain length of time would usually be required before the conversion took place.

THE CONVERSION OF PAUL.

If we consider the case of Paul, for instance,

we are introduced to him as an ardent young Jew who is exceedingly zealous of the traditions of the fathers, and he gives himself to the persecution of those of the Way. I think we are justified in saying that in those days he was searching, under the urge of an inarticulate restlessness, for a peace that would not come. The Law appeared as a possible satisfier, and he gave himself to it with whole hearted devotion; but he did not find favor with God nor peace in his soul. The persecution of the Christians appeared as a possible satisfier, and no one was more zealous in pursuit of them; but still he is disappointed. Then on the Damascus road, his restlessness becomes completely defined for him in relation to Jesus, and his desire becomes articulate; He must have fellowship with God through Jesus, and in this he finds his peace.

Paul had abundant opportunity to become acquainted with Jesus as the centre of the new religion before the Damascus experience. He saw Stephen stoned for his faith, and likely heard the address given by the martyr in his defence before the Council.

He had persecuted the Church, and thus had been brought in vital touch with a number of Christians. These impressions would not slip unobserved into his unconscious mind to create a secret admiration for Jesus. They were, for the time being, the vivid thing that occupied the centre of consciousness, for he was persecuting Christians to find peace. So, in the days of activity, he evaluated them only as disturbing elements. Then came the ride to Damascus, and the leisure that brought the consciousness that the orgy of persecution was not bringing peace; with this would return the memories of the Christians in the hour of danger and even of death, and the confidence with which Stephen commended his soul to Jesus, a confidence that undoubtedly marked the Christians as a whole. So, Jesus is presented to Paul in relation to his restlessness, not as a disturbing element, but as a possible satisfier, and his conversion was the outcome of this recognition. This is offered as a perfectly natural explanation of what happened to Paul on the Damascus road. I do not think we are justified in saying that Paul was a Christian, even an incipient Christian, before this experience, although a Christian complex was being built up in

his mind; up to this time he was a persecutor of Christians. The beginning of his Christian experience, was the recognition of the change of relationship between his restlessness and Jesus. When this happened he became conscious of sin, in that he had lived so long and so intensely in an unsatisfying way, and this is projected back over the days of his search, and is interpreted in terms of conflict.

THE WAY OF FAITH.

The fact that the Gospel message makes articulate the restlessness of men, does not guarantee that it will bring peace, it may merely intensify the discontent. It may, for instance, articulate the restlessness falsely, and thus awaken hopes that cannot be brought to realization. This was the case of the Law with Paul. Judging from Stanley Jones' books, it is what is wrong with the religions of India. If this happens there is grave danger that the depressing weight of hopelessness will settle upon the individual and deaden his efforts. It may articulate the restlessness only to make light of it, and lull it back into sleep. This seems to me to be what is

happening today in those movements where a cheap propaganda is making headway by advocating the negation of thought and the blind acceptance of an easy faith.

The significant thing about the first century Gospel, however, was that it correctly defined the restlessness of the age, and provided a quite adequate solution. It presented the world with a salvation that met its need, but the salvation was not obtained in any mechanical way. There was a rite of baptism which had great significance, but it was not correctly an initiatory rite which led to conversion, neither was the Lord's Supper an efficacious sacrament; that is, it was not in the days of Paul, although it became so at a later date. Christian salvation in Paul became the possession of the believer through faith, and through faith alone. This no doubt involved an intellectual assent to certain things; one could not be a Christian without believing in God; it was also necessary to believe that in some special way salvation was mediated through Jesus. There would likely be other things that they would be asked to believe, some of them perhaps having a purely local significance.

Faith, however, meant more than an intellectual assent to a dogma. The centre of the Christian message was Jesus who had been crucified; but after his death, those who had been his disciples became convinced that he was alive. It was this resurrected Jesus that was the object of the Christian's faith. He was not an object of perception, they could not lay their hands upon him, nor see him; he was embodied in a message that promised them salvation in his name, and to all appearance he was nothing more. Yet, when they accepted the message, and claimed the blessing that it promised, they entered into an experience in which he was a very vital factor. It is almost idle to quote texts in support of this. The Philippians are "being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God."¹ To the Galatians Paul says; "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me; and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me."² The faith of the Christians appropriated as a living reality the Risen Lord who saved them.

1. Phil. 1:11

2. Gal. 2:20

This statement is, I think, complete enough to indicate the direction in which we must move to find an answer to the questions asked. It is not all that might be said, to do this would mean writing a complete theology of Paul, for I believe that the conversion experience, of himself and his converts, is at the background of all his teaching. He has often sought to interpret it in Hellenistic terms; we may even say that he usually does this, because of the audience with which he was dealing, but the essential thing which we must seek, and find, if we are to understand Paul, is the experience that he seeks to interpret.

THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

The Gospel of John was written with a well defined purpose; "That ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name."¹ The Divine Logos of Greek philosophy had become flesh in the historic Jesus, and imparted the divine, or the eternal life, to use John's word, to believers. No attempt is made to explain the process, except to say that it is made possible through

the Spirit. As a matter of fact, it is said that the process evades explanation. Nicodemus wonders how this can be, and Jesus replies; "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit."¹ You know that the Spirit has worked in a man, because of the newness of life that is manifested in him, and that is all.

Men had lived, in a sense, before they believed, and men were living who did not believe, but there was a distinct difference between this natural life, and the life of the believers. Men were born of the flesh and lived in the flesh, but the believer lived in the Spirit, and in relation to this, the life of the flesh was death, for by believing they "passed out of death into life."² So significant is this change that it is referred to in John as a "new birth" in which the life from above enters into a man and starts him out in the life of the Spirit. This is not essentially different from what we find in Paul. As Dr. E.F.Scott says; "John is simply expressing, with the aid of a significant image, the fact which lies at the root of

1. 3:6

2. 5:24

all Christian experience."¹

The idea is emphasized in this Gospel that the power which produces the "new birth" is external to the man. All that the subject does is believe, and probably, be baptized as the outward sign of his inward faith, then he experiences such a vital change through the action of the Spirit within him, that it may well be said that he is born from above, for the life he now lives has the quality of the life of God. It is "eternal life."

This life was a present possession, not a future reward; the change took place here and now, through the simple act of believing. "He that believeth, hath eternal life,"² is the word spoken. It does seem, however, that baptism has a real significance in the process of salvation. In the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus is made to say; "Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."³ This may mean that the Spirit is given to the believer when he is baptised by water; or it may mean that there is to be a baptism by water

1. The Fourth Gospel. p.281

2. 6:47

3. 3:5

and by the SPirit; it seems certainly to mean that the rite of baptism by water was a significant part of the act of entering into the kingdom. Then in the sixth chapter we are told that the sacramental supper is also necessary to salvation. "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourself."¹ To the disciples who are naturally troubled at this statement Jesus says; "It is the spirit that giveth life; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit and are life."² Thus he indicates that there is a spiritual significance within the external rite.

While the new birth is a Hellenistic conception that John found in the familiar thinking of his day, yet it may well have entered into the Christian vocabulary through the Synoptic teaching. We have already seen that Jesus stressed the need of a new beginning of life in preparation for citizenship in the kingdom. He called his disciples to become as little children, and the writer of the Fourth Gospel takes this familiar statement of Jesus, and translates it into a familiar Hellenistic term, for his own peculiar audience.

THE SPIRIT OF GOD.

So we come again to the place where psychology passes into metaphysic, for I cannot escape the conviction that the Christian experience requires more than psychological analysis. When the New Testament writers sought to confine it in their thought forms, it eluded them. So it is with us, there is something that defies analysis. We do our best to reduce everything to intelligible terms so that we can find peace of mind, but all the time there is a haunting suspicion that we have missed something, and that something is of paramount importance. We speak of being possessed by the Spirit of God, of being in Christ, of a mystical fellowship with Jesus, but what are these but phrases that tell us that we cannot think our way through. We do not interpret the Spirit of God in the same way as Paul. He does not come into the life of man from outside, for both God and man are organic to the Universe. We are coming to feel that reality is qualitative as well as quantitative; that goodness, truth, and love, belong to the Universe as they belong to man. So that, in his endeavor to achieve these

things in his personal and social life, man finds that the Universe is on his side. A "Spirit" operates within him, such as produced the life of Jesus, and provides the motive power for the struggle. Can we do better than say; "This is the Spirit of God?"

This, however, can hardly be classed as an unquestioned fact of perception, it is achieved, and maintained only as a great act of faith. In certain aspects the Universe is not kind and good, it is cruel and indifferent, but we may believe that when the last word is spoken it will be in terms of love. We may appropriate this conception of reality by faith, and live in an experience that breaks through, even yet, the limitations of our thought; an experience that brings with it the joy of salvation.



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